

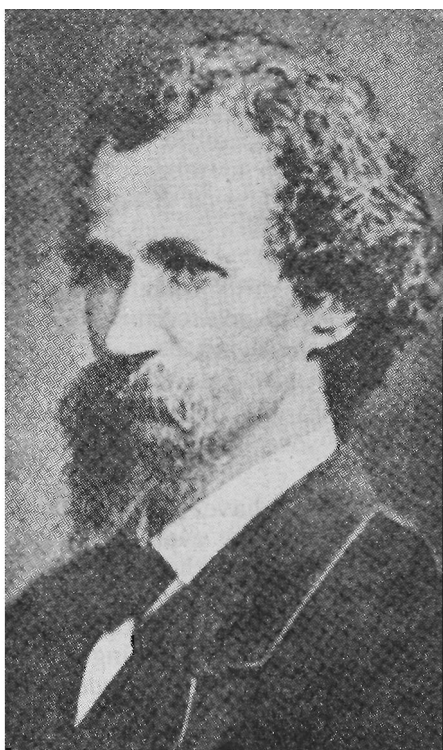
## HENRY KENDALL, A NATIONAL AUSTRALIAN POET

[By HON. T. L. WILLIAMS]

(Read at a meeting of the Society on 22 June 1967.)

I would like to preface this paper with a brief biography of Henry Kendall. The subject of my talk was born at Kirmington, Ulladulla, N.S.W., on 18 April 1839. He was a son of Basil Kendall and Matilda McNally (Irish descent). The father of the future poet died at an early age from tuberculosis, so Henry, to help support his mother and brothers and sisters, took a position as a cabin boy on his uncle's sailing ship which traded in the Pacific.

After two years of this, he took a short job in a confectionery factory and began to contribute verse to newspapers



HENRY KENDALL

in the year 1859. In 1862 he took a clerical job at Grafton, in the employ of a solicitor, James Michael Lionel, who was also a poet, and who had a fine library, which Kendall found very helpful during the fifteen months he was there.

On his return to Sydney he was employed as a clerk in a Government office. He married Charlotte Rutter, the daughter of a deceased doctor, in 1868, and the following year they went to live in Melbourne, where Kendall worked as a journalist.

After the death of their young daughter, Araluen, the couple returned to Sydney in 1870. Owing to domestic disagreements, Kendall's wife left him and lived with her brothers, and her husband's movements at this period are somewhat hazy.

However, he arrived in Gosford late in 1873 in very poor health and poor circumstances, was befriended by the Fagan brothers, and invited to come and live with them at their farm.

His health was improving, and, inspired by the beautiful scenery of the district, Kendall again resumed verse writing, and in June, 1875, he was able to contribute to the support of his wife and children.

The following year the family, reunited, went to live at Camden Haven, where Kendall was employed by the Fagans at their store. In the year 1881, through the influence of the Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, he was appointed to the position of Inspector of Forests.

However, the long journeys on horseback which he had to take in all weathers proved too severe for his delicate constitution, and he was taken very ill at Wagga.

He was brought to Sydney, where he died in August, 1882, 85 years ago, at the age of 43. He was buried in Waverley cemetery. By public subscription an imposing monument was afterwards erected on his grave.

Kendall was perhaps no genius—either as a poet or a citizen.

He can hardly be called "*Australia's greatest poet*" as so many of our writers do, I am afraid. One has to take into account the many other Australians in the field of poetic effort. Such names as readily come to mind include: A. B. ("Banjo") Patterson, Adam Lindsay Gordon, George Essex Evans, Henry Lawson, Hugh McCrae, Dame Mary Gilmore, Brunton Stephens, Will Ogilvie, Will Dyson, Roderic Quinn, Vance Palmer, Victor Daley, Bernard O'Dowd, Zora Cross, Nettie Palmer, Dorothea McKellar, Judith Wright, James Hebblewaite, J. B. O'Hara, Dora Wilcox, John L. Kelly, Chas. Harpur, Shaw Neilson, and several others.

A poet to be great must cater fully for the public need. He must be *appreciated* for his works by the public, and as much as anything else, he must be *understood* by the people . . . whether a sympathetic or a critical public.

### PART OF OUR HISTORY

Poets—like sculptors, painters, musicians, singers, and others—are part and parcel of a country (its past and present-day history, as it were).

Who can think of England, Scotland or Ireland without thinking of Shakespeare, Shelley, Longfellow, Tennyson, Wordsworth, Milton, Bobby Burns, Gray (of Gray's *Elegy* in a Churchyard fame), Cowper and scores of others.

Nor can we think of other countries without thinking of our Rembrandts or our Mendelssohns; Brahms, Liszts, Chopins; our Paderewskis, our Enrico Carusos, our Fritz Kreislers, our Dame Nellie Melbas (and hundreds of other artists of fame in all walks of life, far too numerous to mention here).

Australian poets and singers have played an important part in the history—literary and otherwise—of this country of ours, without a shadow of a doubt, and as such we owe them much, surely.

I think it was Shakespeare who once said:

"Some are born great, some achieve greatness, others have had greatness thrust upon them."

Kendall could perhaps come under the second of those only . . . those that achieve greatness, in their time and in their own particular sphere of activity.

### SUCCESS AND FAILURE

His whole life seemed to be a mixture of success and failure, however. He became easily disheartened and distressed. He took to drink at frequent intervals, in his mid-20's and early 30's in particular. This ultimately led to his young wife and family leaving him, throwing him on his own unhappy resource for many years, unfortunately.

*Success and adversity* . . . happiness and unhappiness, seemed always to be his lot—a combination of the things surrounding the life of Henry Kendall. His life—what I have read of it—would remind one surely and most forcibly of what the noted writer Northcote Parkinson once said:

"People of great ability do not emerge, as a rule, from the happiest of backgrounds. From my own observations I would conclude that ability, though hereditary, is improved by an early measure of adversity and improved again, later on, by some measure of success."

*That to me sums up Henry Clarence Kendall in a few brief words.*

Even towards the close of his life, Kendall remained almost as intellectually ambitious as in his younger days. And buried down deep in his consciousness, suppressed by long breaks of poverty and hardships, unrealised either in social status or mode of living, there was always a *rich bubbling* of culture, and penetrating it all a continual poetic sense of the interest in and importance of living.

### POET OF THE BUSH

To a great many of us who have studied Kendall's works and which are known to most of us who have become students of literature, we must look therein for the "*lyrical atmosphere*" chiefly.

One writer and critic, H. M. Green, has put Kendall this way: "His verse in lyrical moods shows just how he could see, could watch, could perceive, and could convey to us—his people of the bush—just what he wanted to convey for our benefit."

My own study of Kendall makes me agree entirely with that viewpoint.

Unfortunately, much of his writing got away, actually, from a purely Australian "flavour," if I may use that word.

There were many truly Australian words and phrases which he never (or rarely) used, such as "creeks and gullies"; "scrub and bushland"; "valleys and mountain-tops"; "paddocks" and "bush roads"; "plains" and "river beds"; "swamps" and "bog holes," and many more in such free use today, and typically Australian.

Instead, he referred too frequently to and employed too many words, used so freely by English poets and writers—such as "meadows" and "lanes"; "vales," "rills" and "cosy dells" and "dales"; "brooks" and "burns"; "wolds" and "leas"; the lonely "moors" and "moorlands," "stately peaks" and "roughened crags"; "chilly hearths" and "dying embers"—to quote but a few of the many.

### "INSPIRINGLY RICH"

But for all that, let us still honour the man and his work, for they are great in so many ways and inspiringly rich in every way.

Thomas Inglis Moore, in one of his many reviews of Australian poets, has this to say:

"When one gives any thought at all to the matter of Australian poets—early day or otherwise—out of all this conglomeration of names already mentioned—*Kendall's name*

*looms high*. His work as a poet seems to have suffered from repeated setbacks and as one writer has put it:

"His work at times appeared to become practically commonplace rather than intellectual, and at times more fanciful than imaginative."

Kendall had many friends but few enemies, the worst of the latter being probably "*drink*."

Of his many friends can be counted Sir Henry Parkes (the New South Wales Premier) and J. L. Michael, of Grafton (Clarence River), who gave Kendall employment in his office and allowed him full and free use of his extensive library. Michael was a poet of a kind too, and Kendall was most happy here for a time. But he tired of the life as a clerk and eventually returned to Sydney.

In 1862 he had published a book of verse entitled "*Poems and Songs*." Here it was that Sir Henry Parkes became keenly interested in this young and promising Australian poet, and gave him a position in the New South Wales Public Service for a time. About this time (1862-63) he married and won a prize offered for the best Australian poem. He then removed to Melbourne, where he became acquainted with well-known writers of the day—the number including A. L. Gordon, Marcus Clark (of "For the Term of His Natural Life" fame) and C. G. (Hugh) McCrae, among others.

Two other great and close friends were the Fagan Bros., of the old "Red Cow" Inn, Gosford, with whom Kendall stayed for a couple of years, recovering from ill-health following frequent drinking bouts.

This was back in 1838, on present-day "Corumbene Creek," but known in those days of Kendall's residence there with the Fagans as "Coorangbean Creek," in the Gosford district, a little to the north of Woy Woy (on the Hawkesbury River).

This inn is now known as "Kendall Cottage" in his memory and here Kendall lived for two years as the friend of the Fagan Bros., until his health improved and he was able to return to writing, inducing his estranged wife to return to him and living out his life to the end in a new home, until his death in August, 1882.

Incidentally, Gosford is the headquarters of what is now known as the "Henry Kendall Cottage Trust," a sub-committee of "The Brisbane Waters Historical Society." To the people there I am greatly indebted for making me so welcome on several occasions in recent years, and for so much valuable information which has enabled me to make this talk on one so much loved as the late Henry Kendall.

You will always be welcome there, I assure you. It is a

most delightful spot, well kept, with lawns and shrubs adorning its lush and picturesque surroundings, so loved by Kendall himself.

Known far and wide as "Kendall's Cottage," it is well worth a visit and the enjoyment of a cup of tea, if motoring to Sydney or even further on at any time. It houses many old relics.

### TARGET OF CRITICISM

Throughout his life of 43 years only, Kendall became the direct target of much criticism, both of himself and of his work, much of it unfavourable to a degree.

One of his bitterest was Cecil Hadgraft. He and others of the time and since appear not to have taken into account the unhappy parts of Kendall's life and mode of living—the loss of his youngest daughter, Araluen, in 1870; the estrangement with his wife; the death of several of his best poet compatriots, notably J. L. Michael, of Grafton, on the Clarence River, who was found drowned under circumstances pointing strongly to suicide, and Adam L. Gordon, who shot himself at Brighton (Victoria), two years later.

Then came the sudden death of his friendly critic and adviser, Charles Harpur, who died after years of bitter disappointments from poverty and neglect. No wonder the young Kendall took so easily to drink in and around those years.

It is said that he was in such dire straits, at the time of Gordon's suicide, that he was unable to raise the price of a cab fare, to take him to his old and trusted friend's funeral.

### BLAZED FRESH POETIC TRAILS

Perhaps of all his critics, T. Inglis Moore was without doubt the fairest of them all. He goes on to say: "*Henry Kendall is interesting and important to us in a number of ways. Historically, he was the first Australian poet who created (out of a passionate love for his country and its many beauties of mountain stream and bush land) an expression of them in a substantial body of really true poetry.*"

"Like Charles Harpur, he was a pioneer in blazing fresh poetic trails by writing on a variety of subjects (not merely one or two). He was also the first of our native-born poets who established a reputation overseas with poems chosen for leading English and American anthologies, and he was singled out for high praise by such critics as Oscar Wilde and the South African poet, Roy Campbell.

"At home here in Australia, he was widely accepted (from his second book of poems onwards in 1869), until well into this century, as the finest poet Australia had produced.

"He was regarded also as a truly representative poet—a national writer—whose inspiration, themes and images were drawn purely from the Australian scene.

"Even A. G. Stephens claimed there has been no writer more truly Australian than Kendall, for the spirit of the bush hovers over all his poetry. His personality and tragic career have at all times aroused our affection and sympathy, just as his poems (taught in our schools for several generations) have become a familiar part of our national heritage."

I feel that if we are to claim for Kendall a high ranking-place among our Australian poets, he thoroughly deserved it since he had dedicated himself to poetry and pursued his ideal with a stubbornness of devotion in the face of odds so great which left him quite often frustrated.

### "LIFE OF SORROW AND TOIL"

Once during his later days he wrote: "I have led a hard life of sorrow and toil. Hence the work I have done in the domain of literature is only a poor substitute for what I might have accomplished, in happier circumstances."

He had verse published in various Sydney journals and some even in London, when one of his friends (J. Sheridan Moore) sponsored the publication of his "*Poems and Songs*" by the "*Boy Poet of Australia*."

So there, briefly, we have something of the early but hard life of Henry Clarence Kendall, for all the world to know and read.

Gentle and sensitive, romantic and impractical, his family and friends took advantage of his good nature and are said to have treated him scurvily. He was weak in succumbing to their constant demands, giving way to drink, and to his frequent bursts of self-pity easily.

In many of his poems and even letters, he leaves the impression of a rather pathetic figure. Yet there was underlying all this a kind of *toughness* that enabled him to survive the years of toil in the journalistic life of Melbourne and Sydney (years he often referred to as years of rank disaster). Yet to persevere in poetry until his ambition was achieved—to win out over the demon drink, and to rehabilitate his career as well as his home life once again, was his aim.

The Fagan Bros., with whom he lived at Gosford and to whom I have already referred, were a Godsend to him. His health improved and towards the end this country saw something of the *real* Henry Kendall, at his best after all.

His poems have been suitably grouped—those of historical interest; those of pioneering and possessing personal colour;

and those with a romantic tone about them. (Not often done.)

And there we must leave our critics of Kendall, with their varying views on the life and the poems of one so dear to the heart still of his many past and present-day admirers.

I am no critic of writers or their work, and have no desire to be one or of *becoming* one!! But if asked here and now to express my own personal opinion, I would have no hesitation whatever in saying that *Henry Kendall was a mild, gentle type of man, and wrote a mild and a gentle type of poetry*, acceptable to his times and to most of us even today.

But . . . time or the lack of time will not permit of me going much further, not even to mention some of Kendall's most outstanding poems of which there are so many.

One of my favourites, and one of his best, however, is worthy of mention and reading. It is one that is so well known to most of us, entitled: "*The Last of His Tribe.*"

Incidentally, in Kendall's Cottage outside Gosford you will see a charcoal drawing, referring to this particular poem, showing an aged aboriginal woman, seated on a log behind a smoking fire, through which she can see her warrior-husband once again.

The legend has it that a wandering swagman came unexpectedly upon Kendall, just as he was revising this particular poem. He asked Kendall to read it to him, and then asked Kendall to let him make a charcoal-drawing, describing the poem itself.

This hangs over the old fireplace in the Kendall Cottage to this day, showing the old warrior of former days fighting another battle, plainly visible through the smoke haze, with his proud but lonely old gin eagerly looking on. *To me it is a wonderful sketch in every way.*

### THE LAST OF HIS TRIBE

He crouches and buries his face on his knees and hides  
 'neath the dark of his hair,  
 For he cannot look up to the storm-smitten trees,  
     Or think of the loneliness there—  
     Of the loss and the loneliness there!

\*"*Uloola,*" behold him; the thunder that breaks on the tops  
 of the rocks with the rain  
 And the wind which drives up with the salt of the lakes  
     Have made him a hunter again!  
     Both a hunter and fisher again.



The wallaroos grope through the tufts of the grass and turn  
 to their covers in fear,  
 But he sits in the ashes and lets them pass  
     Where the boomerangs sleep lying near—  
     With the nullah, the sling and the spear.

For his eyes have been full with a smouldering thought  
 As he dreams of the hunts gone before;  
 And of foes that he sought and of fights that he fought,  
     With those who will battle no more—  
     Who will fight him in battle no more.

And she sees through the rents in the smoke-haze and fog  
 The corroboree—warlike and grim;  
 And the lubra who'd sat by the fire on the log  
     To watch like a mourner for him—  
     Like a mother *and* mourner for him.

Will he go in his sleep from these desolate lands?  
 (Like a chief to the rest of his race),  
 With the honey-voiced woman who beckons and stands  
     And gleams, like a dream in his face—  
     Like a marvellous dream in his face?

\* "Uloola"—Thou "Spirit of the Storm."